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U.S. Says a Long War in South Yemen Is Possible

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 21 — Reagan Administration officials said today that unless an early cease-fire could be worked out between the rival factions in Southern Yemen, the fighting could turn into a protracted civil war.

They said that there were signs that the uprising last week by an extremist Marxist group had already turned into a struggle reviving longstanding tribal, ideological and bureaucratic feuds.

"It's difficult to discuss South Yemen's problems in Western political terms," one State Department official said. "Basically, South Yemen is more

intelligible. I think, as a turf fight" along the lines of a gangland battle.

In discussing Southern Yemen, which is strategically situated at the heel of the Arabian Peninsula across from the Horn of Africa, American officials said that their information was fragmentary, outdated and based largely on analysis of previously known information.

No Relations Since 1969

They said the Central Intelligence Agency had virtually no independent information on the situation. Southern Yemen broke diplomatic relations with the United States in 1969, two years after independence from Britain. Western embassies, preoccupied with the safety of their nationals, have had little information on the internal situation. Reports from friendly Arab nations are unreliable, an official said.

One senior State Department official said, "We have interests in South Yemen, but no friends."

Washington's principal concern, they said, was that the civil conflict in Southern Yemen not cause problems for neighboring Oman, Saudi Arabia, or Yemen. The United States has military relationships with all three countries. So far, they said, there was no indication that the fighting had spread beyond Southern Yemen.

American officials, who seemed to

take some pleasure in not having to worry about Americans caught up in a Middle East crisis, said that Moscow appeared desperate to end the fighting.

Allied With Moscow

With more than 1,000 military personnel believed to be in Southern Yemen, the Soviet Union has been the main ally of the country's Marxist Government, the only one in the Arab world. The Russians have begun withdrawing as many dependents and non-essential workers as possible. But the Soviet Union, together with other countries, has had difficulty getting its nationals out because of the continued fighting in and around Aden, the capital, the officials said.

The two factions that are struggling for power in Southern Yemen have both professed strong support for Moscow

and, whatever the outcome, there is no thought here of gains for the West.

"Nobody is a good guy in the sense that we're rooting him on, but some are less bad than others," one State Department official said. With that qualification, officials said that the United States would be less concerned if President Ali Nasser Mohammed al-Hassani comes out on top.

The officials said that even though Mr. Hassani was no less pro-Soviet than his enemies, he had long favored a policy of seeking reconciliation with Southern Yemen's Arab neighbors. Under his leadership, Southern Yemen became considerably less involved in supporting rebel groups in Yemen and Oman, American officials said.

"He put into place a policy of not subverting his neighbors by force," after a decade in which Southern Yemen

backed rebels in Oman's Dhofar region and leftists in Yemen, a State Department official said.

Although Southern Yemen's Government is avowedly Marxist, American officials said there was little in common between the Aden authorities and those of a typical Soviet bloc government. A State Department official likened Southern Yemen's rulers to an organized crime group "with many captains, jockeying for power, and feuds settled by execution and assassination."

Several officials said that unless an agreement was reached quickly to put an end to the fighting, it could go on indefinitely. Moscow, they noted, had not backed either side, but was trying to effect a cease-fire.